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## THE WASTE OF UNLEARNING

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The following little one-act play, or, if you prefer, farce, will form the text for this discussion. It is entitled "Chasing an Idea," or, sometimes, "Saved by the Bell."

*Scene.* Any schoolroom in Anytown, Anystate.

*Characters.* Miss Anyteacher, who is an earnest, refined young woman of from twenty-two to fifty, plainly attired in a simple linen dress. Several children—Eva, Amy, George, Henry, Mary, etc.

*Miss A.:* Amy, you may write this sentence on the board: "James's hat is not large enough."

*(Amy writes: "James' hat is not large enough.")*

*Miss A.:* That does pretty well, dear; but who sees what is wrong?

*(Business of raising hands on the part of eight or ten children. Whispered cries of "Miss Anyteacher, let me!")*

*Miss A.:* Very well, George; what is it?

*George:* The last word is spelled wrong. It ought to be *enuf*.

*(Furious waving of hands by pupils, some of whose faces are fairly contorted, as with pain.)*

*Miss A. (patiently):* Yes, dear, some people spell it that way, and some—What is it, Henry?

*Henry (at bursting point):* But *why* do they spell it that way when it's wrong?

*Miss A.:* They don't think it's wrong; you see—

*Henry:* But it *is* [with finality]. Last year—

*Miss A.:* I know, Henry, dear; and we'll spell it *enough* in this class. Well, Mary?

*Mary:* There's something else. *James'* isn't right. It ought to be *James's*.

*Miss A.:* Yes, Mary is right. You may change it, Amy.

*Amy (firmly):* I spelled it the way we spelled it last year. *(Perplexed looks on part of pupils. Murmurs of whispered disbelief on part of Amy and George. General nodding and shaking of heads. Several hands still in the air.)*

*Miss A.:* Lucy?

*Lucy:* My papa is a school teacher himself, and he doesn't put any *e* on large. *(Business of much gasping and amazement at the insurgency of Lucy's parent.)*

Miss A.: Yes, Lucy, I know. Some people do not, but we shall use an *e*. Well, Eva?

Eva (who has just come from another town): They wouldn't let us write like that. We had to make our letters lean over.

Miss A.: I know, Eva. I know, but we must go on to our comma lesson now. Emma may write: "We ate apples, pears, and oranges." (*Emma writes, leaving out the comma before "and."*)

Miss A.: John, what is wrong?

John: I don't know. (*Two or three hands indicate a partial willingness to guess.*)

Miss A.: What's wrong, Henry?

Henry: There ought to be a comma before *and*. (*Whispered debate. Murmurs of "No, no."*)

George: But they told us just the other way last year. How are we going to know which we should do?

Miss A.: I know, child. It is very hard, but—

(*Bell rings for dismissal. Children file out. Curtain.*)

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A large part of the time of the elementary school is taken up with imparting arbitrary, or symbolic, knowledge. The same is true, though not to nearly so great a degree, of the first two years of the secondary school. These nine or ten years of school life should concern themselves largely, on the intellectual side, with the mastery of those letters, symbols, figures, signs, words, and rules, that constitute the instruments of expression of thought, and the keys to the understanding of the thoughts of others. This body of subject-matter we should expect to find fairly definite and stable. Yet if we were to follow the course of a child from the first to the tenth grade in almost any of even our city systems, we should find him obliged, in nearly every grade after the first, to modify or abandon habits that had been carefully drilled into him in previous grades. This is particularly true of penmanship, spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

It will not be the purpose of this paper to go into the matter of penmanship, further than to deplore frequent change. It is rather the purpose to set forth a few specific instances where there is definite disagreement of practice, notwithstanding the fact that these cases would seem to be capable of uniform treatment.

First, as to spelling. One must be very chary in dealing with

this subject, but one cannot ignore it in this connection. There are some points upon which we may all agree. First, the spelling that our fathers mastered (if we may believe them) was indefensible from the standpoint of either phonetics or logic. Its analogies and classifications held good only long enough to lead the student astray. Just when he got used to *made*, *fade*, and *wade*, he came to *weighed* and *bade*. The only way to master an orthography like that was by sheer force of memory. Reasoning might help for a time, but only provided one knew when to stop being sensible. Second, nearly all school men recognize that a change is bound to come, the main question being as to the best means of accomplishing the change. Third, the pupils of the schools must be spared the confusion just as much as possible. Two ways of spelling a word are harder to remember than one. If *though* is hard, *though* and *tho* are doubly hard; and so with *enough* and *enuf*, and all that troublesome tribe. Better stick to one form, though that may be the hard one, where our children are involved, until we are ready to present a fairly consistent and comprehensive campaign.

It is very much to be feared that the confusion that is almost bound to accompany piecemeal revision will discourage those who believe in the ultimate wisdom of the movement. It is to be doubted whether anything adequate, authoritative, and permanent will be accomplished until there shall be presented to the country a comprehensive and logical treatment of the whole field of English orthography, with wide and full recommendations as to the spelling of all sound groups that are at all important. Then if teachers and publishers can agree upon that, we shall have reform.

It may be objected that such a plan is impossible. So was it objected that publishers of grammar texts would never listen to a plan for uniform nomenclature, yet they have shown a most admirable spirit of co-operation. It is not at all impossible that a wide and comprehensive reform in our spelling would be more acceptable to the country as a whole than has the partial reform we now have.

What has been said is not meant at all as an adverse criticism upon the Simplified Spelling Board, or upon any other bodies that

have worked for reform of spelling. A period of confusion would have been inevitable no matter how the movement might have been conducted. The point is: we should recognize that the present situation is not to be thought of as permanent. We must get to a place where there is one right way to spell each of these common words.

Second, as to grammatical terminology. Little need be said upon this point here. Those wishing to see what has been done on this subject should secure reprints of Professor W. G. Hale's admirable paper published in the *School Review* for June, 1911, together with discussions by Professor Fred N. Scott and several others, including the present writer.<sup>1</sup>

It should be said here, for the benefit of those who have not been following this movement, that twenty-five different English grammar texts in current use have eighteen different names for one construction. Worse still, names that are emphasized as being the only right ones are criticized in others as being indefensible. Further, there is a very deceptive shifting and overlapping of names for related constructions. An elementary teacher of grammar is far more likely to be hindered than to be helped by a study of any unfamiliar text. To remedy this situation, the National Education Association has appointed a committee to co-operate with committees from the Modern Language Association and the American Philological Association, to go over the whole field of grammatical nomenclature and report a comprehensive and adequate system of nomenclature for all languages commonly studied in our schools.<sup>2</sup>

There is a point between the fields of grammar and spelling that may properly be discussed here. It is the spelling of singular possessives of words ending in *s*. Shall it be *James's* or *James'*? Most texts, nearly all magazines, and nearly all books add the apostrophe and *s*. The *Saturday Evening Post*, nearly all newspapers, and some texts omit the second *s*. Frequently different

<sup>1</sup> These reprints may be obtained by addressing Professor W. G. Hale, University of Chicago, or C. R. Rounds, West Division High School, Milwaukee, Wis. They contain a full bibliography to January 1, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Hale is chairman of this joint committee, and C. R. Rounds is secretary. Either will welcome communications on this subject.

teachers in the same building follow different plans. Some make a difference between words of one syllable and those of two or more. Some make a difference between the vocalized and the unvocalized *s*. Still others say nothing about it.

As a matter of pronunciation, should it not be *James's*? Do we not sound the second *s*? But most teachers would welcome a ruling, whichever way it went, so that they might have something definite to go by. They would, however, want that ruling to be authoritative, so that they might have the assurance that subsequent teachers would reinforce, and not uproot, their teaching.

As to punctuation, really but a phase of grammar, to point out one or two specific cases, how shall we punctuate a series? Shall it be "apples, pears, and oranges"? Or shall we omit the comma before the conjunction? Texts are fairly evenly divided. Newspaper practice is all in favor of omitting the comma before the conjunction. Is not logic, however, on the side of the comma? The use of the comma here is not merely to indicate the omission of a conjunction, but to indicate parallel construction. There frequently come times when its omission leads to ambiguity.

Then, what about the introductory adverbial element? "When we inhale, our diaphragm flattens" would be punctuated by most newspapers in such a way as to put us in dire peril of inhaling our diaphragms. We teachers are not even agreed among ourselves, in our practice; but even if we were, the papers that the students read would undo our work.

Just one more. How shall we handle this: "He did not do the work. It was too hard for him." Some very excellent writers and teachers of English are simply putting a comma between those two statements. Newspapers almost never do this, and it seems to the present writer as though there is no defense for the practice. The two statements, when the conjunction is omitted, constitute two sentences. The least punctuation permissible, it seems to him, is the semicolon. But the point is, there ought to be some *right way*.

The problems indicated above merely show what a field there is for a unification of our practice in very definite and concrete lines. Do they not suggest an opportunity for invaluable service by our National Council of English Teachers? That body would be in a

position, after competent investigation, to speak with an authority that has long been a dire need. Backed by action of the National Education Association, recommendations of the Council would be heeded.

In conclusion, we are inclined to forget how large a proportion of a pupil's time is taken up with learning arbitrary things. He is dealing with symbols of things, with names, punctuation marks, signs, and the like; and with rules for these symbols. We are inclined, too, to forget how real and vital these things are to him, if he is being well taught.

He reaches mastery here only by hours and days and weeks of the most painstaking drill. He notes details. He delights in them. In this phase of his life, a mastery of these details, which are to be the instruments for expressing his own thoughts, and his keys for the interpretation of the thoughts of others, is, on the intellectual side, the most important business of his education.

When we disturb him in the conceptions that have been drilled into the very bone and fiber of his being, we are trifling with the rights of childhood, and weakening the whole process of education.

For it is the right of the child to be taught this arbitrary, symbolic knowledge, once for all. It is the right of the teacher to know that her work upon her pupils will be accepted at par by the next teacher. It is the right of both students and teachers to experience that thrill of joy that comes to all teachers and learners when they find their previous study and teaching corroborated in subsequent work.

It is hard to estimate the waste that comes with the process of unlearning, but these items may be accepted as inevitable:

1. The shock of changing a deeply rooted conception leaves the student in a precarious and doubtful possession of both conceptions. It is utterly unsound to contend, as so many seem to do by implication, that you make it easier for a student when you give him a new name for a thing, or a new way of spelling a word. So far from it, you make it doubly hard, for he now has twice as much to remember. When, as in our grammar terminology, these names have ramifying connections with other conceptions, you make it practically impossible for him to keep the matter straight in his mind.

2. Disturbing a student in the possession of what he has worked hard to gain discourages him. He comes to lose faith in the virtue of mastery and the potency of study. If so many things have to be turned topsy-turvy in his mind, he thinks, is any of the work he has done, or that his teachers now urge him to do, worth while? He comes to take a skeptical view of the whole process of schooling, with its shifting, undependable rules. His faith in his teachers is weakened. His enthusiasm and ardor are dampened. The greater his care in the past, the more poignant will be these feelings.

3. The teacher finds her work overturned. The careful teacher, who is honest and exacting in her requirements, feels this with particular keenness. Thus a discount is virtually put upon drill—the very life and breath of elementary-school work—and a premium is put upon carelessness.

So let us hope that we may be given a reasonable set of things to teach. Then let us teach those things and allow them to stay taught.